



The recent rediscovery of White-winged Flufftails in Ethiopia

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The White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi* is one of the least known birds in Africa. Their unpredictable habits and secretive nature make them a very difficult species to study. Two populations are known in Africa, one in Ethiopia and the other in southern Africa^{1,6}. Records in Ethiopia come from a number of high altitude marshes around Addis Ababa between July and September, coinciding with the wet season and there is one record from the south of the country at Charada in May 1905². There seems to be no site where White-winged Flufftails are found on a regular basis. Swamps around Addis Ababa, eg at Entoto, Gafersa, Sululta, Debre Birhan have been visited by birders between June and September but there has been no guarantee of seeing this bird and this has led some to speculate that White-winged Flufftails do not show regular seasonal movements but rather irregular eruptions and dispersals which are related to periods of greater or lesser rainfall³, perhaps making different wetlands suitable for the species in different years.

In Ethiopia there have been 26 records in the period 1905 to 1957, mainly taken by hunters shooting Great Snipe *Gallinago media*. John Ash searched Sululta and Gafersa (from where 19 of the 21 specimens were collected) between 1970 and 1976 but failed to find any birds. There has been one record since then of a bird in August 1984 from Sululta⁵. Between 1990 and 1994 John Atkins searched the Sululta swamps on many occasions, particularly in September. Despite searching in the area in which the flufftails were discovered, and using small boys as beaters, no birds were seen.

On 12 August 1995 YD, MW and PR set off for a reconnaissance visit to the site where the species had last been recorded in Ethiopia. The intention was merely to ensure that we could locate and get access to the site, and also to announce our intention to take a closer look at the site to the local inhabitants and to the authorities at the military installation which overlooks the site, and so we did not reach the locality until

after 10.00 hr. However, on arrival the military authorities had no objection to our presence and the local inhabitants pointed out the easiest access route down into the valley where the site was located.

As the rain was holding off we decided we may as well go and have a closer look. We slithered down the slippery paths of the side of the valley and emerged into the valley bottom. In the centre of the valley ahead of us was an area of undisturbed marshy vegetation. The vegetation on either side of this seemed too short and dry to hide even the smallest rail, so, aided by a herd boy who saw the chance for an interesting diversion to his normal Saturday morning routine, we started quartering the marsh at the centre of the valley. It was only a few minutes before MW and our small assistant got a fleeting glimpse of something small with white bits on it flying a short distance. We closed in on the spot it had dropped into and there were a few anxious moments as it appeared to have either vapourised or been beamed up by a matter transporter. However, radiating out from the spot we flushed a pair of minute-looking rails, both with startlingly obvious white secondaries flashing like semaphore. It was a kind creator that made such a skulking bird so easy to identify in flight! Our small assistant looked somewhat bemused at the ensuing whooping and cheering, but was quite happy that his morning had definitely turned out more interesting than just staring at cows.

Following our initial success of flushing a pair at the first point that we entered the marsh we felt that the bird would probably turn out to be moderately common at this site. To try and get an idea of the number of birds in the marsh a method which quantitatively recorded birds was needed. Flushing by beaters walking through the grass was unsatisfactory as birds were reluctant to fly and also we did not like to disturb the fragile vegetation too much. YD, MW and PA returned at a later date with a 35 m rope and dragged it over the marsh so that it lightly skimmed the top of the vegetation. This proved extremely effective



Sululta Plain, Ethiopia (Phil Atkinson)
Plaine de Sululta, Ethiopie (Phil Atkinson)

and we are reasonably certain that all birds flew when the rope went over the top of them. The marsh was approximately 500 by 250 m (12.5 ha). We visited the site on 29 August and 16 September and on both occasions recorded 2 pairs of birds. We marked the areas where the birds flew up from and recorded water depth, vegetation height and the percentage cover by sedges and dicotyledonous plants. We also sampled 30 randomly located points in the marsh where no birds were found. We only had four points with birds and this severely limits any analysis. However the mean values showed that flufftails were found in areas with approximately 60% sedge / 40% dicotyledonous cover, mean water depth of 11.08 cm and a vegetation height of 49.5 cm. The points at which birds were found within the marsh did not appear to be different from other areas of the central marsh. However, further along and away from the bottom of the valley the vegetation was shorter, heavily grazed and dominated by grasses and there was little or no standing water away from the stream which ran along the valley bottom. These areas appeared to be unsuitable for flufftails and none was found there despite searches. Further searches were made at this site and the last date on which birds were seen was 16 September.

Threats

Grass cutting is a traditional activity that typically starts after the rains. However, the small swamp at Sululta is not threatened by this activity during the period ap-

parently favoured by the flufftails. These activities usually begin in October, by which time the site may be unsuitable for the species, because of drying out. Furthermore, grazing is limited at the site to the sides of the valley, ie the low lying waterlogged / swampy areas are not grazed, thus affording protection to the species. This may not apply to other sites in the Sululta area, where grazing and grass cutting are more widespread. Grazing in particular occurs in many areas throughout the year. Cultivation is not seen as a threat since it is only possi-

ble on the drier valley sides. However, a serious threat is a proposed water-control scheme, which may mean that, within the next few years, the site becomes deeply flooded by a dam in order to provide water for Addis Ababa. Strong action will be needed to protect the site.

Threats to flufftail populations elsewhere (particularly in the highlands) are likely to have come and will continue to come from increased cultivation, drainage, grass cutting and overgrazing by an increasingly large population of domestic stock.

Future Surveys

Future surveys should pay attention to any other suitable habitat that can be found, particularly in the July–September period: undisturbed, swampy areas, with longish rank grass. Swamps of any size, small or large, should be considered as possible sites. Sites for future investigation will include high-altitude marshes in shallow grassland valleys occurring in the Gofu hills, north of Entoto, swampy areas between Chacha and Debre Birhan (9°45'N–9°50'N and 39°50'E–39°35'E), swampy areas west of the Amerti Dam in the Fincha'a area, Zimbiri Swamps in the Agew area, as well as other swampy areas in the vicinity of Sululta. In view of the sighting from Charada, efforts should be made to investigate suitable habitat further southwest and west and also at other times of the year. The rediscovery of this species in an area where it has frequently been searched for provides some hope for its relocation at other sites.

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Comments on a possible new species of Scops Owl *Otus* sp on Réunion

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In a previous issue of *Bull ABC*, Renman reported the possible existence of a new species of owl on Réunion Island.² During a visit there in October–November 1993, he heard a call like that of a scops owl *Otus* and eventually saw the flying silhouette of a small owl-like bird disappearing into the forest. As there had been no previous report of such a bird on Réunion Island, this encounter was rather striking. Here we would like to comment on this observation and add new, as yet unreported, although less recent, sightings of a bird that seems to confirm the existence of a previously undescribed owl on Réunion.

First of all, there is a popular belief, although it has never been reported in the literature, of the presence of a nocturnal animal in Réunion forests, which might be (and is described by some islanders as) a small Strigiform. Its local name is 'Bêbête Tut', referring to its call. It should be noted that no bird currently known to exist on Réunion has a call that matches this description. Secondly, in March 1983 C. Guillermet, an entomologist, was collecting insects at night in the northern part of Réunion. Although not an ornithologist, he clearly saw what he described as an owl approaching his artificial light (Guillermet, pers comm). Unfortunately, this observation was disregarded when reported to other ornithologists at that time. Thirdly, while being totally unaware of this fact, one of us (CA) was able to tape record in September 1988 an unidentified call while searching for the highly

endangered Mascarene Petrel *Pseudobulweria aterrima*. This call was recorded in the southern part of Réunion, and remained unidentified until 1991 when VB heard it and identified it as the call of an *Otus* species. Lastly, during additional searches for the Mascarene Petrel, an unidentified, possibly *Otus*, call was again heard twice in March 1995 in the southern part of Réunion. These calls, however, do not match the one described by Renman.

To conclude, a small owl has been seen or heard on at least four occasions between 1983 and 1995, which tends to counter the possibility of vagrancy by another owl such as the Madagascar Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*. Moreover the calls of the Réunion bird are very different to that species (Attié and Bretagnolle in prep).

It seems highly likely, therefore, that an *Otus* or a similar species of owl does exist on Réunion. However, it has not yet been clearly observed, and its relationship to the recently described extinct taxon, *Mascarenottus*,¹ will have to be clarified. ↻

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